



Highlights of [GAO-08-872T](#), a testimony before the House Subcommittee on Information Policy, Census, and National Archives, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

## Why GAO Did This Study

Multiple federal programs provide services and support to the approximately 50 million individuals with disabilities in America. While some health and economic data on people with disabilities are currently available, these data have limited use in providing a comprehensive assessment of how these individuals are faring. Additionally, the lack of more useful data limits the federal government's ability to determine how well federal programs are serving individuals with disabilities.

GAO is providing information on (1) the limitations of data currently available to assess the status of individuals with disabilities and (2) how better coordination could help facilitate the collection of such data to inform policy decisions.

This statement is based on prior GAO reports, including the May 2008 report on modernizing federal disability programs (GAO-08-635), the 2007 Comptroller General's forum on disability (GAO-07-934SP), and multiple reports on national indicators (e.g. GAO-05-1); and studies by other organizations, including the National Council on Disability.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-872T](#). For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or [bertonid@gao.gov](mailto:bertonid@gao.gov).

## FEDERAL DISABILITY PROGRAMS

### Coordination Could Facilitate Better Data Collection to Assess the Status of People with Disabilities

#### What GAO Found

Disability policy and programs in the United States have been developed on an individual basis over many years, with success being measured by individual program outcomes rather than with a unified set of national goals and indicators to assess how people with disabilities are faring. In 2005, GAO identified over 20 federal agencies and almost 200 federal programs serving individuals with disabilities that provided a wide range of assistance, such as employment-related services, medical care, and monetary support. These programs often have different missions, goals, funding streams, eligibility criteria, and policies that sometimes work at cross-purposes with other federal programs. In addition, these programs collect data to measure specific programmatic goals but not to provide a set of metrics to assess how federal programs are improving the lives of individuals with disabilities. Although other data on individuals with disabilities are collected on a national level, these data do not share consistent definitions of disability. As a result, these data cannot be easily compiled to create a comprehensive picture of the status of individuals with disabilities, which could better inform federal disability policy and help ensure that beneficiaries are given timely and appropriate supports. GAO and others have acknowledged the need for creating a common set of outcomes for disability programs and the appropriate measures for assessing progress toward shared goals.

To facilitate an effort of reaching consensus on desired outcomes for people with disabilities, coordination among the key players in the disability community is required. In May 2008, to better serve people with disabilities, GAO suggested that Congress consider authorizing a coordinating entity consisting of leadership from appropriate agencies that serve this population to develop a cost-effective strategy to integrate services and supports for individuals with disabilities. Consistent with its proposed charter, such an entity should play a critical role in developing agreed-upon, desired outcomes for disability policies and programs and in determining what metrics and data will be used to assess progress toward meeting those outcomes.